

Common Questions About Anthrax

1. What is anthrax?

Anthrax is the common name of a type of bacteria called *Bacillus anthracis*. Anthrax is found in the soil in most parts of the world and forms spores that sit in the environment for years at a time, like a seed. If a lot of these spores are inhaled or eaten or get into a break in the skin they can become active and can cause animals or people to get sick.

2. How can anthrax make me sick?

There are three types of anthrax disease:

- **Inhaled** anthrax disease is rare in nature. The last case diagnosed before October 4, 2001, was 23 years ago. It has early symptoms much like the flu, but it is very dangerous and must be treated with antibiotics immediately.
- **Gastrointestinal** anthrax comes from eating contaminated meat, and no one has gotten this type of anthrax disease during this situation.
- **Cutaneous (skin)** anthrax is the most common form of anthrax disease but is highly treatable. It starts as a boil-like lesion that appears on the skin and forms an open sore with a black scab in it. It is painless, but some people think it looks like a bad spider bite. It forms where anthrax spores get in a break in the skin.

3. If I get sick, will doctors be able to know if I am sick with anthrax?

Yes. If you get sick there are tests your doctor can do to find out if you are sick because of anthrax. Anthrax bacteria make a person sick when they get into the blood, and doctors can look for it in a sick person.

4. Can anthrax be treated?

Yes. Inhaled anthrax can be deadly if not treated early, but there are several antibiotics that can successfully treat the disease. Even better, if you have been exposed to anthrax, anthrax disease can be prevented if you take antibiotics as directed by your health care provider. When CDC or health department staff recommend that you take antibiotics after being exposed to anthrax, it is because it can prevent you from getting sick with inhaled anthrax.

5. Is there an anthrax vaccine?

Yes there is, but antibiotics will protect you as well as the vaccine does, and they start to work right away. The vaccine is currently recommended only for certain military personnel and laboratory workers at risk for repeated exposure to *B. anthracis*.

6. Can I make other people sick if I have been exposed to anthrax?

No. People who get sick with inhaled anthrax cannot give it to other people. Also, if you are exposed to anthrax, you cannot infect others.

7. If I get anthrax spores on my skin or clothes how do I get rid of them?

Washing your hands with soap and water and washing your clothes will send the spores safely down the drain.

8. Should I be concerned about my family if I am exposed to anthrax?

Family members of mail handlers or postal customers are not at any increased risk for inhaled anthrax disease. Spores may stick to shoes or clothes. People who work in areas with a higher risk of anthrax exposure can take extra precautions by changing from their work clothes before going home and washing their hands. Washing your hands with soap and water and washing your clothes will rid your clothes and hands of any remaining anthrax spores.

9. Is there a test that will tell me if I am going to get sick?

No. At this time, there is no test that can be done on a healthy person to tell them if they are going to get sick with anthrax. If they have been in an area where the environment is contaminated, and public health authorities recommend antibiotics for prevention, no currently available test is needed.

10. What is nasal swab testing?

Nasal swabs are used to look for anthrax spores in the environment (your nose), the same as when tables, chairs, and air filters in a building are tested. Unfortunately, this test cannot tell you if you are going to get “sick” or if you are “safe.” The decision about who needs treatment is made based on what environment may be contaminated. Once we know where the anthrax contamination is, nasal swab tests are not needed. Everyone in that environment who may have inhaled anthrax spores needs treatment, regardless of the result of any test.

11. How do you decide what to test?

Public health officials will review if a building is contaminated and if you are at risk. In their review, they will use the best science available to determine if a risk for illness exists. Environmental tests will be done to find out if there is a chance of workers getting inhaled anthrax disease and to decide who should get treated. It is important to remember that even if a few anthrax spores are found, the contamination may not be great enough to pose a threat to health.

**12. Why are some people in Washington D.C. area taking medicine now?
Do I need to keep taking my medicine or start taking medicine?**

On October 15, when a letter containing anthrax powder was received in Senator Tom Daschle’s office, and on October 21, when the investigation was expanded after a postal worker was diagnosed with inhaled anthrax disease, health officials

decided that preventive medicine was needed to make sure no more people got sick. At this point, health officials have set guidelines to find out who needs to take medicine and who doesn't in the Washington, D.C. area. If no more letters containing anthrax are found and no one else is found to have inhaled anthrax disease, the following steps will be taken for those working in Washington, D.C. area mailrooms or handling mail.

- No anthrax spores found – those taking medicine can stop and no more persons will be given treatment
- Presence of anthrax spores – for those employees who are at risk and are now taking medicine, they should continue to do so while more tests are done.
- Persons who received letters received from a mailroom where anthrax spores have been found are at a low risk for inhaled anthrax, and in consultation with medical authorities do not need to take medicine.
- If more tests show a risk of inhaled anthrax disease, the workers in the areas where the spores were found should follow public health authorities instructions and take antibiotics for 60 days to ensure they will not get sick.

13. Why don't all people working in a building where anthrax has been found or in a building receiving mail from a building with contamination need to take medicine?

Deciding who needs to take antibiotics and who doesn't depends completely on whether a person has been exposed or their chances for exposure. Persons working in the mailroom and handling the mail are at an increased risk of exposure to anthrax. However, for those mailrooms receiving mail from post offices where anthrax spores have been found, it is very unlikely that contact with a letter with anthrax spores stuck to it would cause inhaled anthrax disease. There may be a risk for skin anthrax disease. Fortunately this form of anthrax is treatable.

14. Why is CDC now recommending that people exposed to anthrax spores take doxycycline instead of ciprofloxacin ("cipro")?

Ciprofloxacin was initially given to everyone who may have been exposed to anthrax spores. Once we made sure everyone was protected by Cipro, we tested the anthrax to see what would kill it and found that ciprofloxacin and doxycycline work equally well. Since doctors have lots of experience treating people with doxycycline for months at a time, such as teenagers with acne, CDC now recommends that people use doxycycline for the prevention of inhaled anthrax disease.

15. I am tired of taking medicine, when can I stop?

It is very important that you continue taking medicine for as long as the health department and CDC recommends. We will work with you to provide notices, updates, and reminders of the importance of you to take your medicine as prescribed.

We will continue to provide you with information about anthrax disease, ways to minimize side effects, resources to call, and updates on the ongoing anthrax investigation. We also encourage you to continue to seek health care if you feel sick.

16. How long am I protected after I stop taking antibiotics?

The antibiotics protect you from only one exposure to anthrax. If you are exposed a second time, you may need to take 60 days of antibiotics after that exposure.

17. How will we be protected in our jobs in the future?

Follow the safety instructions you are given at work. The CDC, health departments, and other experts are working very hard to answer this question. Mail can be processed through a special machine designed to kill any anthrax or other bacteria in the mail. This process works like taking an X-ray and has no lasting effect on the mail. In the near future, there may be more of these machines used and more recommendations to make mail handling as safe as possible.

18. Should I take antibiotics to protect myself from anthrax even if the Health Department and CDC say I don't need them?

No. All antibiotics can have side effects and, in some cases, can make people sick. Because of this, you should only take antibiotics to prevent anthrax if you have been told by the health department and CDC that you have been exposed to anthrax and need to take them.

19. Is it safe to take the flu shot?

Yes. It is safe to take the flu shot. It will not protect you from anthrax, but it is important to protect yourself from the flu because it can be a deadly infection, too, and it is very common.

20. What kind of package or letter should concern me?

You need to stay alert to any package that looks suspicious. This could be because there is

- a. a lot of postage (more than necessary),
- b. poorly written or sloppy address,
- c. misspelled common words,
- d. no return address,
- e. wrong titles,
- f. not addressed to a specific person,
- g. marked with "confidential," "do not open," and other such messages, threatening language, and
- h. postmarked from a city that does not match the return address.

You should also check the appearance for any oil stains, discolorations, odor, lopsided or uneven packaging, powdery substance felt through the paper, excessive weight, ticking sound, or protruding wires or aluminum foil.

21. What can I do to protect myself if I find a suspicious package?

If you do find a package that is suspicious there are guidelines to follow. They are:

- a. Do not shake or empty the contents of any suspicious package or envelope.
- b. Do not carry the package or envelope, show it to others or allow others to examine it.
- c. Put the package or envelope down on a stable surface; do not sniff, touch, taste, or look closely at it or at any contents which may have spilled.
- d. Alert others in the area about the suspicious package or envelope. Leave the area, close any doors, and take actions to prevent others from entering the area. If possible, shut off the ventilation system.
- e. WASH hands with soap and water to prevent spreading potentially infectious material to face or skin. Seek additional instructions for exposed or potentially exposed persons.
- f. If at work, notify a supervisor, a security officer, or a law enforcement official. If at home, contact the local law enforcement agency.
- g. If possible, create a list of persons who were in the room or area when this suspicious letter or package was recognized and a list of persons who also may have handled this package or letter. Give this list to both the local public health authorities and law enforcement officials.

It would be good to post these guidelines in your mailroom and ensure that everyone who needs them gets them.

22. I've heard other stuff was found in the anthrax. Does this make it more dangerous?

The FBI did report that other substances (silica) were found mixed with the anthrax in the letter sent to Senator Daschle. This was used to make anthrax spores more likely to float in the air and be inhaled by people. The anthrax itself is the same as is found in nature.

23. Will my building be closed?

Not necessarily. If a building has employees who have developed anthrax disease, parts or all of that building might be closed until the building can be cleaned up. Also, if a building has a lot of contamination it might be closed for cleaning, even if no one has gotten sick from anthrax. There are certain levels of anthrax that may be found but not be dangerous to your health. If this is the case, the building will not be closed and health officials will decide if more testing needs to be done. Buildings tested that show no anthrax will stay open.

24. If my building is closed, how long will it stay closed?

If your building is closed, it will stay closed until tests are completed and anthrax exposure is no longer a threat for workers. If there is a low risk of exposure, the

buildings will be reopened and cleaned. Once it is decided that the building is safe, it will be reopened.

25. Who is handling the testing of buildings?

The Government Services Administration will be in charge of arranging for sampling and testing Federal buildings. CDC will make sure the results are correct. Each agency that is tested has a representative who will receive the results and will be able to share those results with you when they are ready.

26. Why didn't public health experts know that mail workers would get sick at Brentwood Postal Facility in Washington, DC?

What has happened here is a deliberate terrorist attack on America. Nothing like this has happened before, and no one knew what this weapon was capable of doing.

Medical experts understand a lot about the disease caused by anthrax in nature. It usually infects animals like cows and goats in certain parts of the world because it is found in the soil there. The severe inhaled form of the disease that killed the two men who worked at the Brentwood Postal Facility is extremely rare in nature. The last case in the United States was over 23 years ago.

27. Is CDC prepared to handle a large bioterrorist attack?

CDC has emergency plans in place in case this happens. There are stores of antibiotics already in place to treat millions of people and these can be shipped quickly to wherever they need to be. Much of what we have been doing recently has helped to improve emergency plans and is adding to our knowledge of what is needed to protect people from a terrorist attack. The postal workers and mail handlers who have been affected by this incident should be honored for their courage in the face of this cowardly, failed attempt to frighten the American people.

For further information:

CDC Public Response Hotline (8am-11pm Monday to Friday)

English: 1-888-246-2675 Spanish: 1-888-246-2857

CDC bioterrorism website: www.bt.cdc.gov